

Pioneering in Kansas (1859-60)

by Alfred Wilson Philips, Sr.



Source: Albert Bryan Papers, WSU Holland Library Archives, Pullman, WA.

– from Patrick Lordan

On the 2nd day of January, 1859, I left Bloomington, Indiana for a trip to Kansas. Taking with me in my pockets enough money for my expenses for a prolonged trip and \$400.00 in money in a belt around my body with which to buy land. I went south to Mitchell, [Indiana] thence west to East St. Louis, [Missouri]. [I] crossed the river in a ferry and took passage on the steamboat *Minnehaha* for Kansas City, Missouri.

There were about 400 passengers on rather a small riverboat so [we] were much crowded. At night the cabin floor was covered with cots on which a large proportion of the passengers slept. We were about four days in making the trip from St. Louis to Kansas City. On the way up the river, I got my first sight of a prairie. Also it was my first sight of slaves at work for their masters.

We landed at Kansas City in the afternoon. It consisted of a string of warehouses along the riverbank. [There were] some houses built on the surrounding hills and one street cut to a grade through the big hill, with here and there a place cut out for a building to the street grade. I could step from the bank to the roof of a two or three story building. On the farther side of the hill was one street with possibly two or three dozen houses, called "McGhee's addition." In all there were probably not over six or eight thousand inhabitants in Kansas City. There were a large number of the passengers [who] left the steamboat here.

At the hotel I met with three other men who were going into Kansas to various places. All was going to travel afoot, so [we] agreed to go together as far as our roads went in the same direction. I had set my head to go to Berea in Franklin County. One of the other men was going to Osawatomie, Lynn County. The other two were going to Black Jack, west and north of where we were going. (My diary I kept is in my home in Waitsburg, [Washington], consequently I cannot give exact dates.)

In the morning we all four started out together, each man with his carpet sack. We traveled south along the Missouri State line for several miles, then our course turned more westward. We walked twenty-six miles that day; [and] stayed at a little log cabin, where the road forked, one going west, the other south. Two of our company went west [the] next morning; I and the other going south. In an hour the roads forked again; I going southwest; other man south. Shortly after parting company, I met a man with an ox team—a very large man with heavy black hair and [an] unusually heavy black full beard—a peculiar- looking man. We noticed each other closely. About a week later when we met again I found it to be W. L. Service, formerly from Bloomington, Indiana and to whose house I was then going. Shortly after having met Mr. Service, my road led down a hill into the timber of Bull Creek.

I was now in the Shawnee Indian Reservation, and there was lots of Indians living along the creek. These were the first Indians I had ever seen, and [there was] no white man within miles of me. I really did not feel very comfortable in the new surroundings. The roads were very muddy and [there were] numerous little streams to cross, but I made my way as fast as I could with no one interfering with me in the afternoon. My road took up a small creek leaving the reservation.

In the evening I came to the cabin of a frontier man and woman. Old people. The cabin was probably 10 by 12 [feet] chinked but not daubed. A cat might crawl through the holes. This day I had walked twenty miles. I got something to eat and went to bed. The bedstead was made by boring a hole in the logs on each side and putting a pole from each of these holes to a post which formed a platform on which a lot of prairie hay was laid and some old blankets. This was about 10th of April, and a regular Kansas blizzard came up that night. In the morning my bed was covered an inch or two deep with snow. I felt like this was a pretty rough introduction to Kansas life. Out I got up, had some biscuit and coffee for breakfast and started on.

In an hour or two the snow was all gone. I soon came out on high land again in a couple of hours. I came to Spring Hill, where [there] was the usual sign of a town: a flagpole—then a saloon, a store, and a dwelling or two. At the store I found that the *Marais Des Cygnis* River had been past fording for some days, but that morning some man had forded it. Pretty soon three men came in on horseback who had just come across. [They] said it was nearly up to the horses' backs but could be crossed.

I hired a fellow there who had a horse and a mule to take me across. He took my sack and started across on the horse. I on the mule. The water came just to the seat of the saddle and by putting my feet along the top of the mule's neck, I went safely over without getting wet.

Here I started out for a house three miles ahead, where Mr. and Mrs. Hastings lived. Mrs. Hasting was a sister of some Wolf boy who were in college when I was in Bloomington [Indiana], and I had promised them to see if I could [visit them]. Here I stayed over night having traveled about 16 or 18 miles.

Next day I started on for Berea, 15 miles distant and without a horse. In the vicinity of Berea, the first person I met was William Akin, brother of the now Pullman [Washington] Akin[s] [--Olive Akin/Aiken was his son Charles Strong Philip's wife. Her father was Alexander Akin of Pullman, WA]. Then [I] went [to] the house of W.L. Service, whom I had met near Kansas City but did not know [it]. Indeed there was not but one person in the territory whom I had ever seen and had but little acquaintance with him. Among the Berea people were L.M.L. Carson whose wife was a Wylie [a Bloomington family related to Mattie Philips, A.W. Philips' wife]; and also John Kelsey. All had formerly been Bloomington people. I also stopped with Rev. Jeb Smith some.

After some days I went to Garnett, which consisted of a sawmill, a schoolhouse, both built by a Kentucky company—and probably six to eight houses. [There] was no post office yet. Shannon was its post office, about a mile away. Dr. Lindsay lived here (a widower). Rev. John R. Slenty, a United Presbyterian Minister had temporarily located here. While traveling by team to Americus, one of his horses got away and left them without a team—the way Garnett United Presbyterian Church came to be started.

Mrs. Slenty had a brother named Eakin who had a claim 6 miles from Garnett, and he told me of a good claim that I could get by jumping the town site of Washington. It had been laid out for the county seat but had been defeated by Garnett and would not likely be contested. He took me to see it and to see the president of the company. He said that he was willing for me to take it and would not contest it unless he was ordered to do so by the company. Old Judge Campbell of Garnett, the probate judge, was going to Lecompton to the land office. I gave him the money to file on it for me. He took the money.

When he came home, I went to him for the certificate, when he then informed me he had just filed on it for the town company. He had in his official capacity taken the money from the town company months before and in order to defeat it—should it beat Garnett for the county seat—and had not filed on it. So his treachery caused me to have to go to Lecompton and file a contest, then notify the company to appear at a certain date to contest their claim.

I got my claim in due time, but it made me [take] two trips to Lecompton. [I] was also there on several other occasions, some of them by team, some afoot. On one trip by team we had our horses stolen by Indians, who hid

them in the brush; after hunting until we were tired, we gave the Indians \$2.50 and soon had our team again.

On another occasion we were stopping at an Indian house over night. While we were taking care of our team, some other fellows came in and eat the supper we had ordered, and the cook would not get us any more. All we could get was bread and new milk, warm and fresh, a thing that above all others I disliked, but it was that or nothing. Most of my traveling that summer was by going afoot; on one of those trips to Lecompton, I walked to Garnett, taking a straight course across the country, which was sparsely settled by way of a paper town [i.e. only formally on paper (?)].

Minneola [was] laid out for [the] state capitol; it consisted of a big hall for [the] Territorial Legislature and a big hotel. Only a family or two [were] holding down the town site. Here [I] stayed over night. [The] next morning it was raining. As the date for contesting my claim was approaching, I had no time to lose, so [I] started out over a big unsettled prairie grass, high and wet. In a couple of hours I came to the timber of the big *Marais des Cygnis* River. Here [there] were lots of the Ottawa Indians.

[I] traveled several miles down the river to the main road where the city of Ottawa now stands. Here was an Indian cabin on each side of the ford. The river was very high and running very swift. I gave the Indian 25 cts. to ferry me over in a log canoe. I then walked on four miles to Mud Creek. This was a small creek, but at that time [it] was past fording. I walked a mile or two upstream to find a log. [I] found nothing but a good-sized pole lodged against a couple of trees but across the deep part of the stream. Here I undressed, tied my clothes up in a tight roll, got a balance pole, waded in and climbed on the pole, which sank to my waist. I felt my way with the stick, got to [the] farther end, jumped off into water more than waist deep, waded out several rods through brush and briars, my legs scratched and bleeding. The nearest soul[s] to me were the Indians four miles back—or the little town of Ohio City ahead.

Here I dressed, rain still falling and walked on to Ohio City, getting there about dark. Here I bough[t] and also borrowed some dry clothes. [I] stayed over night at the hotel. Here I made the acquaintance of George W. Iler, ever after close friends for the twenty-five years of my residence in Kansas. Mr. Iler was here with a load of goods going to Garnett to start a store. [He] was laying over on account of high water.

The next morning I rode one of his horses across Middle Creek and drove it back to him. I then walked on to the Patawatomie, about 15 miles. Here was another barrier. I had to walk downstream about 8 miles to where there was a canoe. Here I was ferried across and came back up the other side to

Garnett, walking about twenty miles after being within four miles if I could have crossed where I first came to the creek.

In those days land had to be taken by preemption. The settler was required to have a house. It might be almost anything that you could get into—and [then] live on the claim five days. The government price of land was \$125.00 per acre, but you could buy a land warrant for 160 acres for \$145.00 to \$148.00. I used one on my claim.

The loading of land warrants was a lucrative business at that time. I bought one for Jack Norris and one for William McLaughlin, taking their notes, each for \$240.00 in a year, thus getting \$92.00 interest on \$148.00 for one year. I got some more money from home and loaned W. L. Service a \$148.00 warrant [and] took [a] note for \$240.00 in a year. [I] bought four yoke of oxen from him the next spring for the debt. [I] also loaned Henry Castle \$100.00 at 40%. [The] next summer [I] took a cow, calf and yearling heifer for the interest. [I] also loaned W. L. Carson \$200.00 to pay off a mortgage, which he failed to do, and I lost most of that.

After getting my land and making many trips here and there over southern Kansas, I could not see that I could do more there that summer, so [I] concluded in [the] last of June to go back to Indiana. [I] walked all the way to Kansas City. [I] took a boat down the river to St. Louis. At this time there was not one mile of railroad west of the Missouri River. I got back to Bloomington about [the] 1st of July, 1859.

[I] helped brother Hewey cut his harvest. [I] worked most of the time that fall, and in February again [I] started back to Kansas to improve my land. This time I went north to Lafayette, Indiana, then west to Turney, Illinois. And to St. Joseph, Missouri, by rail, the then farthest western point of all railroads.

On the Hannibal, St. Joe Railroad, I met Paint Hiner, a young man whom I had met in Garnett the summer before. We traveled together all the way to Garnett. At St. Joe, we hired a team to take us to Atchison, Kansas (four of us who were going in that direction). Here Hiner and me started out on foot for Lawrence—about 75 miles.

Nothing of special interest occurred on the trip until we came to the Kansas river. Our trip had been through an almost unbroken Indian reservation. At the river, a white man lived on the Indian, or north side, of the river and kept a rope ferry. The river was freezing over, and by morning [it] was closed all the way across. The ferryman said he believed we could cross on the ice. The ferryman, Hiner and me each cut a pole 15 or 20 feet long, took hold of that in the middle, got on our hands and knees, and slid or crawled across the river safely. We then walked from Lawrence to Garnett—50 miles.

After spending some days in Garnett, I went to my land 6 miles southwest and engaged boarding with Zar Bennett and family for \$1.50 per week, Mrs. Bennett [was] to do my washing also.

Soon after this I went to Berea, Franklin County and bought four yoke of oxen, two pair of them unbroken steers. I never had handled a yoke of oxen in my life, and [that] was awkward enough. So after I bought 80 acres of land with 20 acres of timber on it and went to making rails and posts to fence 80 acres of my prairie land. [I] hired [Zar] Bennett to help me. We made about 2000 rails and posts. [We] did not get the land fenced that spring.

F. W. Jones was also boarding with [the] Bennetts; [he] had a claim about 3 miles away. He also had a yoke of big long horned Texas cattle. He was a good teamster. He helped me break my cattle, and we joined teams and broke prairie. [He] broke 44 acres for me. Both of us got sick. [I] was off six weeks, the best of the breaking season, then [I] hooked up one team again and broke 22 acres for him. We both had bilious fever, and both [of us were] much run down that summer and did not recruit up until winter. We had no rain all summer—1860.